

ROUND TABLE ON THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Introduction

Dr. Suresh Awasthi

Concerning the theme of the Round Table, first of all, I would like to say a few words about the need and the relevance of this Round Table. We felt that we were passing through a very exciting phase in our contemporary theatre and that it reflects a quest for its own identity. It is marked by a sense of discovery, a sense of exploration of the past and there have been very interesting experiments both in playwriting and in play production, utilising conventions, techniques from the traditional theatre. P. L. Deshpande, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir have taken inspiration from the traditional theatre to enrich their theatre work. Adya Rangacharya and Girish Karnad are evolving a new dramatic form by using some of the techniques and practices of the classical and folk theatrical traditions.

Tradition always plays an important role in any creative artistic activity, especially in our context and in the field of performing arts. For all these years creative artistes have gone back to discover it afresh. But I really cannot explain the phenomenon or the nature of contradiction in our socio-cultural situation that either we adore the tradition or we just reject it without examining its validity for our creative work. When I talk of the tradition in the context of creative activity I talk only as it concerns a creative artiste. In my view no creative artiste really can afford to ignore the situation that we have a vast, rich continuous tradition in all these fields of performing arts. It seems to me that even for rejecting the tradition, for discarding it, for destroying it, we have to build up some kind of creative link and relationship

with it. It is compelling; it is inevitable. We just cannot escape it. Cannot become indifferent to it.

Ten years ago I was responsible for organising a Seminar on a similar theme as the General Secretary of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh and at that time some of us during the Seminar said that we had no past in theatre. Whereas we have a past of more than two thousand years. It was also said that whatever past we had, is irrelevant for us today for our contemporary theatre work. But something has happened in our socio-cultural life that our attitudes have changed and as I said earlier there is a quest for identity leading to the exploration and creative utilisation of the tradition. This has resulted in some exciting work and also it is very significant that the playwrights have utilised this material from the traditional theatre in terms of forms, conventions, techniques, to communicate most contemporary ideas and themes.

Every student of Indian theatre knows that Sanskrit theatre is a dead tradition for us. But the same Sanskrit tradition inspired imaginative playwrights and director in a foreign cultural milieu. I would like to refer to the work of Alexander Taidov, who was a co-worker of Stanislavsky and when he broke away from him, tired of his realistic tradition and methods and organised his own theatre, he was inspired by the imaginative poetic quality of Sanskrit drama, a drama of convention, stylisation and the first production he did was '*Sankuntalam*' in 1914. And later as we know, Meyerhold was again inspired and he taught Sanskrit as a text-book to his actors in 1918 and 1919 and since then for all these six decades in the West, playwrights, directors in countries mainly in Russia, France and Germany have been coming with this spirit of quest and exploration of the Eastern theatrical tradition which culminates in the work of Brecht. The exciting work done during the 4-5 decades in the Western theatre is really inspired by this quest of the Eastern tradition of which the Indian tradition is a very important and integral sector.

Then I would also like to refer to the fact that it is only in the field of theatre where we have the artificial gulf, the break between the traditional and the modern heritage. Whereas in the field of music and dance, there is a continuation and close link which is a special feature of our artistic and cultural life between the two traditions. This link was broken only in the field of theatre. We have to, therefore, make a deliberate effort as creative artistes and face this challenge of exploring the tradition and it is only in this process that we can assimilate, recreate and destroy the tradition.

It is normally thought that the folk forms are only religion-motivated and decadent forms. On the contrary it is very much a living tradition. In fact, in some of the forms like *Tamasha* and *Jatra*, folk theatre has shown signs of new dynamism and today *Tamasha* is the most powerful theatre of social criticism and social change than any other type of theatre, whether traditional or modern. This dimension has always been present in our traditional theatre and the largest sector of our theatre is really a theatre of secular values, a theatre projecting contemporary life. In fact as I said even the religion motivated or

temple-based theatre, say, *Ras Leela*, or *Krishnattam*, *Ankia Nat*, even there we have this dimension. They generally bring in contemporary material, project contemporary life and secular social values through the *Vidhushaka* or minor characters. In the song dialogue they keep their mythical gods and heroes to their divine superhuman level. But bring down the same gods and heroes to their own social level in the impromptu prose dialogues. The Prahalada legend performed all over the country in all traditional theatrical forms is a legend of protest and defiance. It seems to me that there is something inherent in the very structure, in the very scheme of the traditional forms that they adjust and adapt to new through the process of contamination, hybridization about which we occasionally get very nervous and panicky and thus remain significant and meaningful for the contemporary audiences constantly enlarging their dimension in time. Otherwise, in all traditional societies, traditional theatre would look increasingly irrelevant and anachronistic. You watch a whole night performance of shadow theatre, leather puppet, in Indonesia. You sit in a theatre in Tokyo and watch a *Noh* performance for four hours. The Japanese society has evolved a synthesis and retained its traditional theatre and other arts. Therefore, it seems to me that as creative artistes we have to confront the traditional, specially in our case where tradition is a continuous living vital force and confronting it we have to resolve the conflicts. So most of the issues involved are: what should be our attitude; how can we assimilate, how can it become an integral part of our contemporary activity; is it going to survive only as a museum piece? How can it be adopted most suitably for urban audiences. Also how can it be supported in its own milieu? These are various questions. And it was really in this context that we conceived this Round Table and we are fully convinced of its relevance.

THE YATRA AND ITS RELEVANCE

Utpal Dutt

This talk will be based on my experiences with the *Yatra* in Bengal and I hope it will be relevant to the subject in general. Before the current trends appeared, the *Yatra* both in form and content was distinctive:

- (a) Its content was closely associated with mythology;
- (b) it was also Morality Play, setting forth Good and Evil in terms of black and white;
- (c) it relied on community of emotion between actor and audience, on predisposed sympathy of the audience for the mythological hero it knows so well and its hatred of the Asur;
- (d) thus, though the actor wore no mask, he was bound by such predetermined norms that individual conflicts and emotions

played no part in his behaviour. He was in effect wearing a mask;

- (e) during the great anti-imperialist struggle of the people, new plays adapted the mythological pattern and the Englishman became the new fixed Evil and the Indian revolutionary a rigid Good.
- (f) though songs and dances and stylized gestures did play some part, the *Yatra* has always been essentially spoken theatre. Even its prose had to be poetic;
- (g) perhaps the most exciting thing about it was its Clowns and their horseplay, free of religious code; its Bibek and Juri.

Commercialism and the Managers' greed led to a spate of plays which made no advance towards creating individual emotions but transferred the entire Morality structure to modern conditions. Good and Evil now donned modern costume and, shorn of the grandeur of myth, became laughable. Also, girls began to play girls' parts. Time of performance was cut down from an average of eight hours to three, so that the troupe could play two or three times a night. Infantile "experiments" in lighting began, threatening to destroy the very nature of *Yatra*. Further, the actors were told to curb and thus emasculate their florid style, and snatches of dialogue began to replace verse.

Over the last three years however, a far healthier approach is noticeable among playwrights and producers, especially with regard to subject matter. Politics has now almost swamped the *Yatra*. Every conceivable subject from Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh to Jallianwalla Bagh is being tackled, and serious efforts are being made to analyse human emotions in human terms, and rescue the characters from the fetters of myth. But the other and perhaps more important task reviving the old mythological epics and preserve the style of Old *Yatra* has not been undertaken at all.

While the purity of old *Yatra* must be preserved, I believed new plays and new themes must constantly be used to enrich *Yatra*. The *Yatra* cannot survive as a museum-piece. Its very nature demands that it move with its audience, constantly dramatize the collective experience of its audience. It must reflect today's angst, and yet preserve all that was powerful in the sphere of Form, much in the tradition of Peking Opera and "Red Lantern".

The problems of production one faces today if he tries to sweep away the commercial rubbish that has accumulated and to create living drama in pure form:

- (a) how to adapt the myth-form to modern themes, how to create a Fable out of the welter of political and dramatic material, how to be defiantly fairy-talish, and yet make it believable;
- (b) how to adapt the alienated, conventional and picturesque style of acting to the needs of a credible theme wherein the audience must to a degree identify itself;

- (c) how to preserve the arena-style of production, with its virile rejection of sets, lights and make-believe, and yet to create for example an atmosphere of total war that a recent *Yatra* play on Viet Nam demands, or an atmosphere of terror that a play on Hitler demands
- (d) how to create verse-drama that will preserve the tradition of old *Yatra* and yet capture the nuances of modern speech. Also a problem is to create verse that has to be spoken by an actor and understood at once by an audience largely ignorant, simple and robust
- (e) how to experiment but never to forget the source and inspiration of *Yatra*, the unsophisticated masses of the countryside; how at once to be popular and elevating.

MODERN RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL THEATRE

G. Sankara Pillai

(1) By the term 'tradition', I presume, we mean both the folk and classical traditions which form an everlasting store-house for the contemporary theatre worker. They form the basis one which he can build up the new theatre practices. Calling the contemporary traditions also to his help, he can make a fusion of the three and create something new—a new form of play writing and presentation.

Thus the traditional theatrical forms become important in more than one way.

- (i) They are to the practitioners a long cherished heritage which they are bound to keep unextinguished and to pass on to the next generation.
- (ii) They are to the more daring amongst them, forms to be experimented with and to be made more suitable to the present day taste.
- (iii) More than these two, which, perhaps, were prevalent in fore-gone days also, there is yet another importance gained mainly during the present century. As our concepts about 'modern drama' have developed we are now looking at our traditional theatrical forms with a new insight. The modern playwright wades through these treasures to find out new forms to express his complex inner-self; the producers examine them to find out suitable styles to be adopted in order to convey their interpretations. Thus, the traditional theatre, in the hands of the modern theatre worker, becomes a help, inspiration and guidance for achieving new styles in writing and production.

The fact that we are here to discuss this subject itself shows the awareness of the present day theatre-worker not only to the richness of the theatre traditions but also to a better understanding of his own medium.

(2) We should be extra-cautious about these three approaches to the traditional theatre. We should know which to promote and which not. The first, i.e. to present traditional forms as they are, is less harmful than the others. The artists do as they are taught to do and the modern theatre-man is not allowed to meddle with them. The one and only thing we can do is to prevent them from the two eventualities of decay and death. But, the second trend according to me is to be viewed more cautiously. Almost all attempts to 'modernize' the traditional theatrical forms have played havoc with them. The innovators either by their ignorance or by their lack of understanding have destroyed the purity and the innate qualities of the traditional forms. I don't say that it is not at all possible to have any change. But for a man to effect any substantial change in an artform of a long heritage, he will have to study the whole evolution of that particular form. He should see the purpose of every minute factor included in it. Moreover, he should have the creative genius to alter any part of the traditional forms and should be daring in that endeavour. As a result, much talk and very little action has been achieved in that direction. The changes which certain forms are said to have achieved are superficial in nature. When I say this I have in mind the oft-repeated cry in Kerala about the 'innovations in Kathakali'. The slight modifications effected are mostly immature in nature for the simple reason that the advocates for these modifications fail to have an all-embracing knowledge of both the literary and theatrical aspects of this particular art-form. The history of the development of Kathakali as an art form shows that all the innovations introduced in its acting, costume, make-up etc. were done by patient theatre-practitioners who had a comprehensive knowledge of that art-form and who were most observant of the other similar forms existing in those times.

(3) When the modern Indian playwright wants to express his mind, he may find that all existing dramatic forms fail him in achieving the aim. Then he will be forced to find a new one and that urge will induce him to begin the search—the search of all traditional theatre forms in his own land and elsewhere. He will be forced to examine all the aspects of the folk and classical traditions. It is not difficult to find answers to his questions; but the real difficulty is to synthesise them in order to create a new form. What exactly needed is a thorough synthesis of all the three traditions—folk, classical and contemporary—to evolve a new form and a new style of production—a new diction to be handed over as our legacy.

I admit that this is not an easy job. Also, this cannot be achieved within a stipulated time. Systematic research and various experiments are to be conducted and glory and failure to be shared with equal grace. But the fact that this is possible is shown by the evolution of Kathakali which has reached its artistic perfection. It has its roots run deep in the folk and classical traditions then prevalent in Kerala. The make-

up, head-dress, instrumental accompaniments, all are directly taken from various folk dances, which are even now performed by the unsophisticated artists in the remotest villages. As stories reveal, '*Ramanattam*' and '*Krishnanattam*' were the results of two such attempts to integrate the theatrical aspects of the then prevalent folk forms. '*Ramanattam*' later developed to the present form of '*Kathakali*' drawing inspiration later on from '*Natyasastra*' and '*Kudiyattam*'. The history of the first hundred years of its development shows more than one 'guru' who is well-versed with all the intricacies of the form as well as other similar theatre forms then in vogue, trying to make new innovations in its style. It was through the efforts of these 'directors', so to say, the present forms emerged out. It has thus achieved the proper combination of folk and classical traditions. The '*Kalari*' type of martial training also had its mark on it and that acted as the contemporary tradition. The 'actor-directors' who tried for this synthesis were able to achieve it effectively and a new art form, quite different from the existing ones, was born.

I think such an approach and such a synthesis should happen in the present-day-theatre of India. And in that sense also the traditional theatre becomes more important for us.

May I add this much too. Such a synthesis should be pioneered by the directors rather than the playwrights. Excuse me again for drawing a parallel from Kerala. Even before our ancestors were acquainted with the Sanskrit plays, we had an 'actor class'—called 'Chak-yars' and they used to have certain theatrical forms—more narrative in nature. There were also so many varied Folk Theatre forms—ritual dances, forms of visual entertainments. Sanskrit plays were adopted by these actors and with the help of the Royal Patronage they were able to find a new style of production. That is '*Kudiyattam*'. It has imbibed elements from the folk forms of that period. There are also rituals of the 'Koothu' tradition in them. Thus '*Kudiyattam*' was the fruit of a synthesis in the style of producing sanskrit plays. The plays were the same but the style was different and distinctly Keralite. This in its wake influenced the writers and scripts were specially written for '*Kudiyattam*'.

Playwrights will get inspiration from such a newly awakened theatre-consciousness and finally this will result in the widening of our theatre horizons. Modern Theatre activity will thus have more stature and glory as its roots go deeper into the culture of our traditional theatre.

A PLEA FOR CO-EXISTENCE

J. C. Mathur

In my opinion, the relevance of the traditional theatre to modern times arises from the seeming irrelevance of some of its exterior features. For example, the traditional theatre is often local not only because it uses the dialect or the language of the region where it is popular but

because the nuances of the gestures etc., are based upon the colour in the every-day life of local communities. As against that in modern times the image of the theatre is becoming increasingly international. The language of gestures and communication transcends the language of words and the inner conflict and urges that are expressed have an international connotation.

Likewise, the modern theatre seeks to be subtle, abstract and to use symbols of a highly individualistic nature. Traditional forms of theatre use symbols that are readily evocative of emotions, ideals and concepts in the mind of the commonman. Their subtlety lies in the sophistication that an individual artist may import within, however, the framework of the common idiom. With this feature is connected of course the whole theory of the object of communication in the traditional theatre. It is unabashedly ethical and sometimes even the propaganda of moral creeds is its motivation. Modern theatre is suspicious of all kinds of motivational communication. It seeks for the playwright and the actor the unrestricted liberty of expressing their personal intense experience regardless even of the receptivity of the audience. In traditional theatre, however, the intensity of experience is a common factor between the communicator and the recipients of the communication. In Indian traditional theatre this communication theory is known as the *rasa siddhanta*.

The essence of the *rasa siddhanta* in dramaturgy is to use the "ladder" of sense-based pleasures, colours, sentiments thus carrying the spectator to the climax of such sheer enjoyment that he loses his individual entity when in the auditorium. This temporary suspension of individual entity is the moment upon which the playwright as well as the actor seizes in order to induct the message which they seek to communicate. Quite often, therefore, in traditional theatre a sequence of uninhibited eroticism (in which some highly revered and universally worshipped characters are shown indulging in such eroticism), is used as a spring-board for conveying a message which to a modern man sounds sheer propaganda on good conduct and morals. To the urban intelligentsia brought up in the international intellectual environment and fed upon the theories dating to Aristotle and coming down to Sartre this sounds sometimes very naive and even laughable. But those who have seen traditional performances of his kind in their original environment mingling with the audience whom they seek to reach are often wonder-struck by the effectiveness of this technique.

There are other "irrelevancies" also of the traditional theatre that seem to obstruct its acceptability to the modern man living in the big cities of India. For instance, the song and the dance wells up in the midst of an otherwise very realistic dialogue as if there were some underground stream just below the surface that gushes forth at the slightest touch. In the Bombay film this kind of song and dance sequence is a crude manifestation of a very deep-seated characteristic of the Indian cultural heritage which can be described but cannot be ignored. Unlike in the West in India the traditional theatre did not get fragmented between what are known as Opera, Ballet and "Drama proper" based upon dialogues. In the West this division took place under the pressure of the social environment of the

16th century renaissance aristocrats of Italy whose example was followed by France and to some extent England. But in India the aristocrat of the Middle ages being largely Muslim could not patronise theatrical presentation though they were great patrons of music and painting. Therefore, the traditional theatre received shelter from the shrine and from a few outlying courts of the Hindu princes as in Assam, Nepal, Mithila, Tanjavor, Kerala, etc. It is true that in the period immediately before this, one of the basic sources of inspiration and patronage was the Vijayanagara Court (covering now the area Andhra and Karnatak) which, even though later destroyed, had radiated the tradition of good taste and artistic patronage to the few surviving Hindu courts in different outlying parts of India. These princelings as well as the temples encouraged a mixed form of presentation in which song, music, dance and dialogue were all treated as equally important components. Today's traditional forms of theatre in India are descended from the formative patronage given during the middle ages by the temple and the small Hindu prince in the outlying corners of the Indian sub-continent.

The relevance, or if you call it irrelevance, of this situation to the contemporary urban situation lies in the fact that these forms have continued right through these centuries and continue to appeal to the common people in the villages as well as small towns and equally in the centres of pilgrimage where audiences accept and look forward to this kind of blend of song, dance and dialogue. This uninhibited expression through rhythm and music interspersed with sometimes extremely realistic and even coarse dialogue is practically a universal idiom of traditional theatre.

Personally, I regard these features described above as being relevant to the future. The other day I was having a discussion with Dr. Mode, one of the Jurists at the Second Triennale. He explained to me that the so-called modern exhibits in the Second Triennale in New Delhi are really the art of yesterday. Today in the west itself the trend is more and more towards a modified kind of decorative art, so much derided by our critics who have criticised the decorative features in the Indian exhibits. Dr. Mode said that the West is having simmerings of a change and they are perhaps soon going to turn their back on the abstract and to the personal complexities of the sophisticated individual. Some Western artists feel lost for the want of communication with the large masses of people.

In such a situation I foresee that the trend in the modern theatre that was started by Brecht (who fortunately has not yet been dethroned from his pedestal) is going to gain momentum with the passage of time when extracts from our traditional theatre are presented to audiences in centres of contemporary culture. Those of you who witnessed or read the reviews of some recent performances in the United States of Kathakali Drama must have been struck by the enthusiasm with which it was hailed in contrast to restrained response which even the great theatre of *Noh* from Japan used to elicit. I saw the *Noh Theatre* in Harvard 8 years ago and I noticed that the audience was very appreciative but rather inhibited. But the last 7 years have obviously seen a change in the modern landscape. A new kind of enthusiasm is perhaps over-powering audiences in modern cities and countries.

In such a situation to my mind at least the traditional theatre of India would acquire a new significance. Upon us lies the responsibility for giving opportunity to the expression of this significance. For this purpose one of the most urgent tasks is to mitigate the tedium of lengthy presentations which are a common feature of most of our traditional drama. The length arose from two rather unimportant considerations. In the first place, most of these performances were held in villages divided by jungles. Audiences came from different villages and it was hard for them to get back to their homes till early morning. Therefore, it was a matter of convenience that the play lasted the whole night. Secondly, literacy was limited. Communication to the audience had to be by repetitions that to the modern mind appear to be extremely boring and unnecessary. In France which is highly literate, I have seen in the Tracodora Theatre known as Theatre National Populaire performances of classical plays at which one could buy for a very low cost the text of the whole play. Moreover, many a theatre-goer has already read the plays. Repetitions to the same extent may, therefore, not be necessary at least for modern literate audiences. They would still be necessary for the large mass audience in villages, among whom the theatre has grown.

What I foresee therefore is the future development of the traditional Theatre in two directions. First it will need to grow in its own ethos in the shrine and in the villages in the midst of large audiences which do not pay for them except the few coins dropped in the *thaal* which is shown round after the performances. It will be cruel to tear away these performers from their ethos and to force them to the city and perform before unresponsive audience that feel bored by the repetitions and the length. All that is necessary is to provide facilities and performance grants to these troupes in their own areas. A start should be made by organising local festivals of these performances in those areas and to give some slight guidance to the organisers of the festival in certain things like the height of the stage, the avoidance of modern trappings and deft use of lighting.

The second development that I foresee of the traditional theatre in modern times is the presentation of edited versions by artists drawn largely from the areas to which these forms belong but give to these selected pieces, some orientation in the modern requirements. Naturally, the presentations will have to be in excerpts or abbreviated forms but in making briefs or selection great care will have to be exercised so as to bring out features and items that are the most intense and characteristic of the forms.

I would plead with you to accept the principle of co-existence in the realm of theatre. I have often been distressed by the dogmatism displayed by protagonists of different forms of theatre, by the fury that is sometimes raised around the controversy between the modern and the traditional. I would plead for the pragmatic approach for which Japan is noted. In Japan in theatre as well as in other cultural forms this kind of co-existence has been recognised not with a view to have a competition in which one or the other trend should disappear eventually but with a view to enabling both to survive and retain their personality. I

think in India we have much to learn from Japan in this matter and I would hope that this Seminar would promote such an attitude.

A SEARCH FOR LINKS

Shanta Gandhi

Theatre is always contemporary. By raising the question of relevance of 'Traditional Theatre', I suppose we are expected to discuss the relevance of those theatre forms and conventions that evolved during the ancient and medieval periods of our history. This would include our existing folk forms as well as the classical and the semi-classical traditions going back to our ancient Theatre. We have to identify and assess the elements that exist, or should exist, in our Modern Theatre, linking it with its past. Our increasing anxiety to discover such links is perhaps the expression of the search for our own identity.

However, it is pertinent to ask ourselves whether this anxiety is justified by the needs of our theatre today. Can these ancient forms express the inner reality of our contemporary life? There is a significant difference between our values and those of our ancestors. Why should we use their modes of expression for projecting our own values? And especially those values which we do not share with our ancestors? Why don't we 'invent' a 'new' form for this purpose? We cannot do this because the new forms are not born in a vacuum. They retain something of the old forms from which they emerge. The very nature of the theatre demands this continuity.

Theatre with its potentiality of becoming a medium of communion, as distinct from its role as a medium of communication, can realise this potentiality only if it can touch the innermost level of the sub-conscious of its audience and evoke its spontaneous collective response. This cannot be done without maintaining some continuity in its Form. In this respect contemporary relevance of the traditional theatre is obvious.

There is an organic relationship between its form and the content it is expected to express. It is evolved in response to the ever changing realities of life demanding expression. The old form gets modified in the process of expressing its new contents effectively. Theatre experience becomes aesthetically rewarding when a subtle balance and harmony is achieved between these two constantly changing aspects of the Theatre.

It is a curious paradox of our Modern Theatre that usually it is those committed artists with compulsive desire for change that are eagerly exploring the possibility of using the traditional forms for expressing their new ideas. Each one of these Forms has its own definite structure with effortless smoothness that comes through maturity. Its

characteristic flexibility lends itself to direct expression and comment without endangering the aesthetic validity of this theatre experience. They can adapt themselves to the needs of the new ideas with effortless ease, without losing their own ethos, if one is careful not to rub it the wrong way. In the name of 'authenticity' if one tries to perpetuate the medieval values these traditional forms project, they will cease to grow as vital Art Forms. They became stagnant and the tradition they represent will soon become extinct if they are not helped to live and grow by exposing them to a fresh stimulant of new contents. Increasing number of our writers are trying to do this. It is perhaps unfortunate that some of our theatre workers are beginning to take notice of our traditional forms through Western eyes, but on the whole this trend promises to bring positive results for our contemporary theatre. The compulsion of a developing contemporary theatre striving to reach a wider audience will inevitably lead to a deeper appreciation of our traditional forms. During the early days of our Modern Theatre, Jay Shankar Prasad had to attempt an integration of the theatre conventions of a *Rasa*-oriented tradition and conflict based dramatic structure. Today there is greater variety in approach and emphasis while attempting to achieve the unity of impact for a valid theatre experience.

DISCUSSION

Extracts from the discussions recorded during the Seminar.

Utpal Dutt: I wish to tell you certain things that have been plaguing the *Jatra* movement in Bengal. I will be speaking only from my personal experience of *Jatra* and I hope it will be relevant to the subject in general.

Unlike many other traditional theatre forms in India, the *Jatra* is a living form. The *Jatra* continues to grow. The *Jatra* changes because it is living and it reflects the aspirations of the people. In the beginning we had *Jatra* purely as a mythological subject. We had fixed patterns of good and evil. Good painted in white and evil painted in black. In spite of the rather stylised movements, it was mainly spoken drama either in verse or in poetic prose. And although the actor wore no mask he was considered to be practically in a mask because he had no liberty, no opportunity of portraying human emotions, human experience, because the story, the patterns used to be set before hand. All the stories were taken from the mythologies with great heroes like Arjun and Krishna, bigger-than-life, and the actor who portrayed them merely reflected the religious enthusiasm and fervour of the audience. There was pre-determined community of religious beliefs between the audience and the actor. Therefore the norms were mostly pre-determined. Everyone knew the story; and yet they were with the actor sitting all together in a community and watching their own religion being acted out and it would inspire them.

The *Jatra* has always been not just theatre, just entertainment. It has been a School, a court of justice and political meeting. Everything. But as the great anti-imperialistic struggle in India began, *Jatra* immediately changed its character, because it had to be with the people, in

the people, among the people constantly. And when the struggle reached its peak especially in 1920s and 1930s, with the so-called Terrorist Movements in Bengal, *Jatra* changed from religious to secular subjects almost overnight and we have the historical and political plays. But what is most important and significant is this, that the pattern remained a mythological pattern. Now the actors dressed differently. But instead of having 'good' embodied in Arjuna we had the 'good' embodied in the Bengali revolutionary with a pistol. Instead of having the 'asura' portrayed in very black colours we have the British imperialists painted in equally black colours so that, although the play is supposed to be reflecting modern themes, the pattern remained that of a myth with very disparate roles assigned to each character.

Now the present trend of *Jatra* is once more something quite radically different from everything that has gone before. Everybody knows what is going on in Bengal. At the moment the *Jatra* theme in Bengal is flooded with guerilla themes. For example in the present season we have a play on the life of Mao Tse-tung, a play on the life of Ho-chi Minh and one on Jalianwalla Bagh. I am mentioning these plays in order to show you that the *Jatra* has been moving continuously with the aspirations of the people.

Those who organise and control the *Jatra* theatre, are called the *Adhikari*, they do not act, they only manage it. Now do you think for a moment that these people have gone Communist? No. They have realised that this is exactly what the people want. This is the kind of play that will sell. Otherwise the people will not congregate in the evening and sit there for 3 or 4 hours. In the process something is lost. Since *Jatra* is continuously in transition and since the mass of people cannot be got to a high cultural level just because we order it from Delhi or Calcutta, people do become influenced by the cinema or by mass art which is poisonous. The people want to see the reflection of this kind of film acting, of lighting and of all kinds of peculiar things alien to the *Jatra*. These *Jatra* owners, most readily respond to people's taste and in the process they are trying to kill or they have managed to kill some very important aspects of the form of *Jatra*. For example the *Vivek*. The *Vivek* used to be a kind of chorus; a singer who used to come on to the stage at a particular dramatic moment. Very much like the Greek Chorus. He would sing and almost dance and go away. This *Vivek* has gone out. Also, has gone out the *Juri*. The *Juri* used to be a group of singers who used to sit with the audience and would act at a particular dramatic movement, and start singing, addressing the actors on the stage. That has also gone out, and the *Jatra* owners keep saying this is how the people want it.

Jatra plays used to be 6-8 hours long. Sometimes even longer—12 hours. They cut it down to 3 hours now. But as I see it the reason is that they want their troupe to do at least two shows a night if not three, and move from place to place so that they can collect more money. That is why they have suddenly cut down the performance time. But whenever you try any real experiment they always say these newcomers

are destroying the *Jatra* form. We (newcomers) are destroying the *Jatra* form because we are interfering with their profiteering. Mr. Mathur in his paper said there are many groups which should be helped. But the *Jatra* in Bengal need not be helped. They can help the Sangeet Natak Akademi. They pay their leading actors the fantastic figure of Rs. 10,000 a month and a motor car while the troupes go on tour. They need not be helped at all. They have tried to bring film actors into *Jatra* and they have also ordered the real traditional *Jatra* actors to 'control' their acting, their traditional stylised form of acting. This results in emasculation. We see *Jatra* actors trying to imitate the film actors in a pattern which is myth. And the result is ridiculous. Only some very clever Directors get away with it. Therefore there are artistic problems if we try to use the *Jatra* for a modern drama, which we have to, otherwise *Jatra* will die; *Jatra* cannot survive as a museum piece, *Jatra* cannot be recorded in 16 mm colour films and preserved for posterity. That is not the nature of *Jatra*. The nature of *Jatra* is its constant reflection of the moods of the masses to which it must cater constantly. It must not only entertain them. It must also teach them. That is why the peasant does come after a hard days labour, and once upon a time used to sit right through the night and go back to his field in the morning.

The problem of modern producers or playwrights who want to use the *Jatra* form are very complex—whenever I use the expression 'use the *Jatra* form' I get nervous. You see, there are these 'sweet young things' from the city who see "alination" in the *Jatra* and a little bit of Grotowsky. They say, 'how virile, how nice. Let us experiment with this form.' But what we do not understand is that *Jatra* is not just theatre. It is a concept of life. It is a way of life; and unless you go to the masses and live with them and feel with them you cannot ever create a new *Jatra* form. You cannot take it forward. It is impossible. But if one wants to really save the *Jatra* form and create new *Jatra* plays one has to preserve the purity of form and rescue it from the commercial tycoons who now control the *Jatra* market and the *Jatra* groups. If we wish really to do this we will have to create a new myth. We have to create the new poetic drama which will reflect modern reality in modern fairytale. And it need not always be as simple as it used to be in the 1920s and 1930s. Because myth can be very, very complex. For example William Shakespear's wit is still a myth. Yet it is very very complex. So we shall have to create this new modern Indian myth. In modern themes, told in a deliberate sophistication of fairy-tale, where the characters are frozen in their attitudes, where the characters become not just personal experience, human experience but the summarised experience of a whole community.

Dina Gandhi: One technical question: When you said that *Vivek* and the *Juri* were eliminated and are now dead, why is it so? Did they not comply with the modern content injected into the *Jatra*? Or were they dropped because of the length?

Utpal Dutt: This took place before any intelligent person took any interest in the *Jatra* and the traditional actor, while he is one of the

greatest actors that I have seen, he is not equipped, intellectually equipped, to fight against this kind of tycoonism. This kind of total control under which the *Adhikari* has placed him. So round about 1940's and early 1950's *Vivek* and the *Juri* slowly began to disappear.

P. L. Deshpande: But *Vivek* has not gone completely. Recently I saw two *Jatra* plays and I found that he is still there. He is the only fairly good singer in the group. He also helps to entertain the people with song and dance. It seems to me that *Vivek* has also been brought in the films often, in the form of a beggar, who suddenly appears in a scene and sings a song which is in the nature of a comment. It seems to me that *Vivek* is not that unimportant from the entertainment point of view also.

Utpal Dutt: The person who now sings in the *Jatra* tries to make the song come naturally as part of the story. So that it does not jar according to the tycoon. The *Vivek* will jar because *Vivek* used to come and interrupt the action and all action used to stop. The king used to sit down and very often the actor who played the king would take off his wig and smoke on the stage while the *Vivek* sang. But what is going on now is cheap entertainment.

Question: You cannot say mythology has lost its appeal altogether for the general audience?

Utpal Dutt: At the moment no *Jatra* group has a single mythological play. But if someone might bring it back the audience might greet it.

Satyadev Dubey: You have stated that the *Jatra* reflects what may be called the already existing mood of the people and therefore what the *Jatra* expresses exists first. For instance let us say if there is also guerilla warfare in *Jatra*, this is because the owners, they scent that this is in the atmosphere. Therefore they include this. But is it not possible that at some stage in the history of *Jatra*, people may have used *Jatra* to bring about the situation? For instance, let us assume there may have been a mythological Naxalite who may have used the *Jatra* form and therefore generated the feelings in the people. Now has this been possible or has it been done or not? As it has happened in the West. Would you say that *Jatra* has always reflected something which has come into being, a mood which has already come into being and that gets reflected in the *Jatra*. This is the point. What would you say has happened? Which came first? On one side you said the owners, they used the feelings of the people. Very good commercial sense I would say and on the other extreme are the people who are trying to conserve the *Jatra* as it is and give different types of aesthetic experience which may have belonged to the original *Jatra*. My point is: if a folk-form like the *Jatra* reflects only the given conditions therefore it cannot be 'social criticism' because it is just reflecting the given conditions. But suppose you create a *Jatra* play and you use the theme which has not been used before and in that you criticise the existing society and thereby bring a change in that existing society.

that would be 'social criticism' which makes the point. Where does *Jatra* fit? In which category would it fall?

Utpal Dutt: Now I think the question is an over-simplification of the case because both things co-exist. There cannot be any demand, there cannot be any direction unless first the conditions are created. First the people always have created the conditions in which someone through the *Jatra* rouses them so that the people can rise. People create that condition. But that does not mean that the *Jatra* writer reflects. He also moulds. He further expands. He carries the ideas to the farther corners of the country. For example, Mukunda Das. This is the great *Jatra* writer who went to prison several times under the British and he is primarily responsible for the rousing of the Bengali peasants on the question of Independence and similarly now, for example the tycoon, he sees there is a good market for such plays. He contacts playwrights. He cannot always control the playwrights. The playwrights are somewhat modern-minded. Nor can he control the directors. So these playwrights write these plays and the directors create new *Jatra* plays and they do not restrict themselves merely to reflecting what the people may want, but also what the playwright wants and also what the playwrights think should be, not just reality as it is, reality as it should be and that further spreads his ideas.

Satyadev Dubey: That means ultimately the initiative is with the tycoon.

Dina Gandhi: I think the commercial pressures that are reshaping the *Jatra*; should it then deserve the name *Jatra* any more at all? Is it the commercial pressures or is it the moral excellence or shall I say the moral message which it still succeeds in conveying, which points to some morality that makes it appropriate as *Jatra*? Or is it degenerating into a commercial melodrama?

Utpal Dutt: As I see it, as far as form is concerned a lot of corruption has taken place but still the *Jatra* retains its features. They have not been able to destroy it entirely. But for the last 3 or 4 years conscious people are coming in who are consciously fighting this and consciously trying to create new content in pure form. So that now the field is not all open to the tycoon to do as he pleases. Now battle is being offered. Now conscious resistance is being offered so that experiment is being done; experiment preserving the purity of the form but creating new plays with new content in order to reflect the present aspirations of the people.

Alkazi: As far as forms are concerned they are very important and an integral part of communication. I think that the very structure of the traditional folk plays is part and parcel of the meaning communicated to the audience because there are various levels of experience and the audience is taken—stage by stage through these various levels of experience. Now these various levels of experience are not only on the intellectual but they are also on the sub-conscious level. That is why music, melody, dance, spectacle etc. have a very important part. The sensual element that is the exploitation of all

the senses and not merely the intellect. Therefore what seems to happen is that when you pour merely new content into an old form the form will necessarily be swept aside. On the other hand it is somewhat important perhaps to understand through experimentation, through research, through investigation and through that scientific approach to the whole thing, the validity of the form. I think the form cannot merely be taken for granted and merely accepted as ritual. One has to understand the significance and the validity of the form in the communication of the ideas.

Shanta Gandhi: We may stress the so-called purity of the form. Is there no organic relationship between form and content? When we talk about letting a tradition live, letting a traditional form live, it cannot live at its own stage. It has to develop. It is the compulsion of the new content which modifies the form. Old set patterns or rigid or so called pure form cannot express this new content effectively without necessary modifications and without losing its force:

Utpal Dutt: The word purity was used merely in a relative sense. Purity of form was here used against the impurities being imported. Just as you cannot have absolutely pure *Jatra* form—pure for a living theatre. So you cannot allow impurities to come in. Its entirely relative.

Dr. Awasthi: Mr. Alkazi rightly referred to the pressure of new content becoming the determining factor in changing the form and the structure of the traditional drama. But it seems to me that for example now take *Nautanki* which is a similar form like *Jatra*. *Nautanki* also for more than 100 years has always communicated, projected, new ideas, new themes of social change. But the change in the form really has happened only during the last two decades. Right from the Arya Samaj movement or Swadesi movement *Nautanki* always encouraged social currents. But it seems to me that this devastating change in the form, conventions, structure of the traditional theatre in different regions, both religious or ritualistic or secular theatre, this is because of certain extraneous elements, in *Jatra*, *Nautanki* or even *Yakshagana*. In *Yakshagana* because of commercial pressure they are giving up their beautiful costumes, headgears, stylisation, conventions and making it simple, straight drama. So, of course, certain changes will be there. But these changes in the structure and the form will be according to a certain aesthetic scheme. Certain things are determined by artistic requirements and they happen during the course of long periods, decades and folk forms in different regions have always changed in formal structure. But these changes in *Jatra* or *Yakshagana* or *Nautanki*—they are because of certain extraneous pressure. And where Utpal Dutt referred to the preservation of the purity of form there perhaps the kind of experiments that these groups are doing are needed. I am not using the word purity of form just to restore the traditional mode. We made an experiment in Bharatiya Natya Sangh 10 years ago. We brought a troupe of traditional *Jatra* actors and asked them "for the last 10-15 years you have been performing with curtains, and proscenium, you have your Ranga, your stylisation of movement.

Will you do this particular traditional play? We will give you only this platform stage. And do this as you have been doing all these decades or as you did 30 years ago!" They did this. And when we asked them, they had tears in their eyes. They said, 'we have greatly enjoyed this. This is very beautiful. We expressed ourselves very beautifully, very deeply. But we had made changes because of certain other pressures'?

Balwant Gargi: I am coming back to the basic question which Mr. Alkazi posed: the form and the content. Well, *Jatra* has undergone during the last 2000 years various structural changes. To start with it was all musical, 100 songs, and no prose. In the middle of the 19th century they found the actors could not sing. So they introduced the *Juri*. Actors, their emotions and ideas were sung by professional singers who were called the *Juri*, on behalf of the actors. They were the 'double' of the actors. This was again structural change, form change. So people thought of ways to get rid of them and they introduced *Vivek*. Then firstly, abstract *vivek* and in the 20's concrete *vivek*, as Mr. Utpal Dutt referred to. So what I say is that *Jatra* has been undergoing changes during the last 200 years purely in structure, form, conventions, everything. So what purity are we really preserving? If we want to preserve *Jatra* purity it will be then 100 songs as it was in the original. Then *Juri* became the important thing. Then *dohas*. Finally *vivek*. Abstract *vivek* and then concrete *vivek*. And I do not know what purity we are talking about. I am concerned with the question—the relationship of the form and the content—if we pour new content in the form which has grown slowly adjusting itself with the changes—is it valid or not?

Satyadev Dubey: As I understood the point Mr. Alkazi made, the point is the purity question now. I saw the *Yakshagana* festival. At one extreme was Mr. Karnad—this was something which for me was totally acceptable and then we saw the other *Yakshagana* forms which were mutilations according to (Mr. Karanth) and he showed us the various forms of *Yakshagana* which were available and he did not show us the worst form of *Yakshagana* which is perhaps the most popular thing in Mysore. Now I think ultimately this question of purity is somewhere the conscious artiste who has at some stage experienced the aesthetics of a particular form and he is very conscious that the aesthetics has to go on changing as he keeps on pouring new content, but somewhere the essence of the form he has captured in his work and he is trying to project that. So now the point is at which stage does this aesthetics of the form die out and the new artistes like Mr. Karanth take over or individual artistes like Mr. Utpal Dutt take over?

N. C. Jain: The question of content and the form in traditional arts I think is a little more complicated than we are trying to make it out. For example, the content of all the traditional plays was based on myth which were shared by the entire community. They were not something which were a sectional experience of the part of the society. While the new content that has been brought in, is it really

part of the collective consciousness? Can they really become myth? Have they already become myth in a society as these traditional forms entirely were in their formal structure as well as in their very approach to the life and aesthetics? They were related to that consciousness which was shared by the entire society. I think this kind of artificial pressure even of the so-called "non-tycoon" adventures into the traditional forms also tends to destroy the form as much the tycoons doing it. The question is of the essential relationship of the experience of the society which these forms incorporated and whether the pressure comes from the commercial side or is it coming from some other ideological angle I think the results in both cases tends to become the same.

Girish Karnad: I wonder if in talking about the purity of forms we are making enough allowances for communication—forms changed very slowly in the 19th Century as communications were very slender and by the time outside influences came to settle down it took 25 to 30 years. The form changed very slowly. But in the last 25 years it is not merely the villages that are changing, we ourselves are changing. And I think this is bound to happen.

The 20th Century artist becomes more and more isolated—I am sorry I did not like the word alienated so I didn't use it! There might have been a time in the 16th, 17th Century when a writer could have said quite confidently, 'I'll write a play on the Mahabharata theme and this will express not what just I feel but at least my whole community will feel—if not the whole society.' Its very difficult in the present situation, and fewer people are able to make this particular claim. Even in the villages an artist because of his particular influences, because he is Naxalite rather than religious, as this particular influence is working on him, he is bound to feel isolated and bound to put forward a particular idea of his.

At this time how does one decide, who decides, where exactly this change comes? In which case I wonder Mr. Dutt if you are not putting yourself on the same wave-length or level as it were of the 'sweet young thing'?

Utpal Dutt: I think we have taken on a problem which cannot be solved here at this table. We have gone to the very roots of this question as to how much of the traditional theatre is really traditional. And how much of the traditional theatre which is living, which has to grow continuously, which is not a museum piece, how much of it is really traditional and how much of it has been collected from contemporary times. How much of it is changing now. Now all the same the word purity in a relative sense will have to be kept in our dictionary! Otherwise what will be the difference between *Jatra* and theatre? There cannot be any difference after some time. If you say after 10 years or 15 years all difference will disappear. Well I do not agree because it is quite impossible. Because we once more go back to the question of the audience and probably as Mr. Karnad says, who decides which is quite right? There is one person who decides. It is the audience. That is the trouble with the *Jatra*. Finally and ultimately the decision is being made by the people who are going to it.

Unlike the city theatre where the theatres in Calcutta which in a way also influences the audience. In the villages although we grant that the old community, and solidarity and its unity no longer exists, its rhythm broken by various class struggles and various conflicting ideologies, etc. But all the same the difference between a city audience and a village audience is precisely this! that the village audience which patronises the *Jatra*, which create *Jatra* indirectly by demanding, by setting the norms is a far more cohesive body than the city audience. A city audience is broken by various kinds of ideologies. At the moment the Bengali peasant is extremely militant. Probably he will cease to be militant in five years time. But at the moment he is occupying the land which was supposed to belong to the landlord and he is also seizing the harvest. Now this is a kind of mentality we will have to understand, to understand how this reflects what the people want at the moment. When Mao comes on to the *Jatra* or Ho chi Minh comes on to the *Jatra* and he speaks about Viet Nam; he speaks in a language which reflects at once the struggle that at the moment the Bengali peasant is fighting. And therefore Ho chi Minh as he is displayed may not really be Ho chi Minh from Viet Nam, but he is at least as the villages views the communist who is leading the present struggle of the peasants at the moment in the Bengali villages. Therefore he is a myth. He is a legend and this legend, this myth ultimately is decided by the people who watch it. All the same you see when I say that the experimentalists those taken up with lately studying the abstract theatre arts die a natural death. When they go and start experimenting with *Jatra* form they are even more dangerous than the tycoon. But there is also the great judge, the decider who are the people. Very fortunately these people—the experimentalist have been driven out. They have not been able to produce *Jatra* plays. It is not possible. They say they have learnt these little beautiful Brechtian techniques, from the *Jatra*. They are using it in the theatre in Calcutta. But they have been rejected by the mass audience. For example so are the tycoons being rejected. I gave you a very terrifying picture only to show you the danger that the *Jatra* faces and the problems the modern experimentalists will have to face inevitably. But the tycoon is also being defeated. For example the star system is broken down. All these film stars taken from films directly into *Jatra* who tried a little 'subtle acting' and the audience has driven them and so that the old *Jatra* actors, traditional *Jatra* actors, trained since childhood in this form, they have come back into their own and they are once more again stars.

Girish Karnad: There are 2 questions. First is the very process that makes Ho Chi-minh a myth for these villagers, is not the same process, at the same time, breaking up the homogeneity which you say they have? Ideas that are revolutionary, proletariat uprising—all this—which are not part of their tradition? Second—its more personal, it affects me as a playwright. You did, I think confuse the 'sweet young thing' who tries to experiment with the *Jatra* and the man who sees the *Jatra* and goes back to Calcutta and produces a play in the *Jatra* form. I think there is difference. I mean, I am attracted by

the *Yakshagana* form. I write a play, in Dharwar, using the *Yakshagana* form, because I feel, in one particular play it helps me to give a form to what I want to say. Now, you'll accuse me of hiding behind the intelligentsia of Dharwar, but I am afraid I am hiding behind the intelligentsia of Dharwar not just for this play but for any play I write, even the most realistic play—because that's the only audience I have. The real danger is to try and be 'folksian'. For an urban man, to try and go into the village because then the "sweet young thing" problem comes up. But I was wondering what your attitude would be to such a man. Would you condemn a man who feels an attraction to the form, at a particular point, for what he wants to say?

Kapila: Has anybody done a sociological study of the patrons who go to see Ho Chi Minh etc, how many of them go to the Kali Temple? How many of them subscribe in their daily lives to Vishnu ritual?

Utpal Dutt: I think the 2 questions are inter-related. Karnad says, whether in trying to bring Ho Chi Minh as a myth we are breaking the homogeneity of the village man, and also the other question is practically interrelated, whether a sociological study has been made of how many people go to the temple? Now once more let us emphasize that as Ho Chi Minh or Mao is presented to the Bengali audience it is the big mass line which comes in. It is not probably Ho Chi-minh, the communist ideology, or Mao making his contribution to Marx-Lenin. Not at all. Now Mao or Ho Chi-minh as brought to the Bengali audience is a receptacle of what the Bengali peasant at the moment thinks and feels. As I said the 'myth pattern'. And it does not preclude the fact that the person goes to the Kali temple, it does not cut him away from revolution or the revolutionary mainstream of the struggle of the peasantry. Not at all. This would be an entirely wrong thing to say that the Bengali audience by wanting plays on their daily struggle, on their most terrible struggle at the moment to seize land or to seize harvest, that the audience, has already become so advanced in scientific thought that they have rejected superstition. That would not be correct.

Kapila Vatsyayan: This is the point. What Mr. Alkazi says cuts at the very root of the matter. There might be layers and there might be double characters. And this can happen only in a country like India where Mao and Ho Chi Minh and the Kali Puja go together. And this is where the strength of the traditional theatre lies. And in all our discussions that we are becoming secular. We are not becoming secular in that sense. This is an addition of another level. That is why this whole discussion is valid in this point of time at this moment.

Shanta Gandhi: Behind any of these forms is there no creative urge of the artiste, a man or a person or a group of people, who want to express through a certain type of aesthetic arrangement—certain ideas? That also carries a certain type of a responsibility. Are they not also behind *Jatra*? Otherwise why *Jatra*? Why not a speech? Why *Jatra*? When you want to talk about the capturing of paddy—what

happens to what particular beautiful thing which is in any artistic creation? Who carries that burden and is that important or not?

Utpal Dutt: I do not see any contradiction between the two. I see especially that the *Jatra* playwrights at the moment who had to make a living first of all. But then they also wish to express themselves artistically. There is no doubt about that. Or some of them are more artistic than others. But each one of them wishes to express themselves artistically. But with the *Jatra* circuit and the *Jatra* audience and the *Jatra* tradition and the *Jatra* myths, it is inevitable that some of his liberties are curbed. There is no doubt about that. But then the artiste does find artistic satisfaction even when he is expressing the community feeling rather than his own. I can make the feelings of the community my own and yet express myself artistically. My artistic ego and my artistic expression can be full.

Shanta Gandhi: I want to bring us back to the question of fragmentation of one's audience.

Utpal Dutt: We have answered that question. This is however how *Jatra* gets around the question. It does not present for example the new myth in a manner which breaks up the homogeneity or the unity of the audience community. On the contrary it creates it again by emphasising only such points in the myth which will at the moment capture the aspirations of the larger mass of the people. There are some persons who are dissatisfied. But by and large the big peasant audience which actually pays for the *Jatra* they find that all their various different ideas come together in that way.

Alkazi: I think that on the one hand there is nothing sacrosanct about any form. I think forms have been created through history, through pressure of circumstances for instance, Kathakali. Therefore there is nothing divine. But on the other hand there is a big privilege which is given to these forms and their sacredness arises from the fact that they have been able to reach a very large number of persons, on several layers of consciousness and also that their sacredness is a result of history, that they have been able to exist over several hundred years, through several generations, they have been able to retain their validity and meaning and relevance. So that the validity of any form is what a great creative person does with it. And the relevance of that and the meaning of that form is in its electric sort of energy that is generated between that form and the audience. What ultimately will determine whether that form has validity or not is the audience. But in addition to that are the great works that you also create along with the audience. I think there cannot be really anything sacred merely about a form, on the other hand we must understand that the sacredness of the form lies in the works created.

(Discussion following G. Shankara Pillai's paper.)

Shanta Gandhi: You said that *Koodiyattam* is the production of Sanskrit plays in a new style. Do you thereby mean that the present *Koodiyattam* is not the continuation of the style in which they were

first produced in Kerala before *Koodiyattam* came into being? Is it a continuation of the style which existed before *Koodiyattam* came into being? Because a claim is made that *Koodiyattam* is the only living representation of the style of production that was in direct continuation of the ancient Indian style. The Sanskrit plays were produced in a particular style and that style and conventions were evolved at a particular time in our history because of need. Now one of the claims is that that style continues almost uninterrupted. I am just asking your personal opinion on this question.

Shankara Pillai: I feel that the *Koodiyattam* is their adapted version of the production of the Sanskrit plays.

N. C. Jain: Mr. Pillai has also said that all attempts to modernise traditional plays destroys their innate qualities and their artistic form. I think it is a sweeping statement to make. Because we have made an attempt in trying to produce a traditional *Bhavai* play like *Jasma Odan*. To an extent it has been modernised and yet I suppose the innate qualities and content of that form have been retained. Some of the elements alien probably to that form which had entered due to other pressures have been removed and some of its relevance to the contemporary audience has been brought out. I suppose efforts of this nature are points which should be discussed in greater detail. Can we use the traditional plays in a manner that they can become more acceptable to the modern audience even in the urban centres rather than their being confined to the rural areas in the old form?

Dina Gandhi: What do we mean by modernising traditional forms?

Mr. Jain: There is another aspect to this question which should be considered here. There are existing traditional plays which are attempted to be produced in a new manner with a certain amount of control and restraint. But there are other attempts like Dina's. Her own attempt. It is a new play written and produced in a particular style. There are two layers of this influence. A traditional play itself produced in a different manner and the other, inspiration taken from the traditional form and a new play written in that style and produced in a different way. The two things cannot be lumped together. The two are of a different nature.

Shanta Gandhi: When Utpal says that *Jatra* is used in a modern manner it has gone through a complete vital change of form. When I see a *Bhavai* actor make a remark or a comment here and there about modern things it does not mean that he has modernised the form.

Utpal Dutt: I think the more sophisticated and rigid the form is the more difficult to develop. *Jatra* being a more unsophisticated form is easier material for development. The forms Mr. Pillai referred to are highly sophisticated. But one should not come out with a statement that it is impossible to develop a form. Anyone who has seen Peking Opera will realise that Peking Opera is extremely sophisticated, and yet it has been used in *Red Lanterns* showing Chinese resistance to Japanese Imperialism.

Shanta Gandhi: Frankly when I started doing *Jasma* I was not thinking of whether I was recreating it or whether I was making any effort of maintaining the purity of this, that or other. Again it emerged out of a particular set of given circumstances. I do not claim the way I have treated *Jasma* that it is exactly as it is done in the villages. But I do claim that I have retained or attempted to retain the ethos of that form. There is a change in the content also of that story. It is my own interpretation. It is not interpreted that way in the villages. Because I had to express these changes, there is inevitably a certain modifications in the form. For instance my *Rangla* has become a link, a much more conscious link than the traditional *Rangla* is. What I would say that I was definitely influenced by the resources and acting talent that I had. I did something else with *Nautanki*. There I had the advantage of people who were *Nautanki* players and there one did not have to make compromises. So whatever changes were brought about were brought about consciously.

Romesh Chander: This particular experiment that you did with *Nautanki* at Delhi when it was taken back to the region from where *Nautanki* came what was the reaction?

Shanta Gandhi: I didn't have a change of trying it, testing it in the manner I should have liked to.

Mr. Jain: It was tried on the rural audiences who are used to the same play in their earlier version and this version to some extent they were surprised by it and yet they also liked some of the innovations that were permitted. It was difficult for the players particularly to stick to this new version. The moment they reached the familiar audience they had the kind of inner pull to go back to their earlier pattern of playing. There are certain other attempts at innovation in this *Nautanki* performance. But here they did not succumb. They were pressurised. For example there was demand for a particular kind of song or a particular kind of tune. They resisted it. They tried to play the new version as authentically as possible. The reaction was mixed—but it was quite liked.

Dr. Awasthi: We have been using the wrong word by modernisation. Better, modern or creative utilisation. And this will again depend on one's creative style and urge. For example our great authority on *Yakshagana*, Shri K. S. Karanth, when he edits the *Yakshagana* traditional form, removes the impromptu dialogue and turns it into a ballet, it kills the very source of theatrical vitality and this kind of edited or adapted form is never acceptable to the audiences. But I have seen similar experiments in *Kathakali* or in *Kabuki* in Japan. There have been efforts to make it change, adapted for urban audiences. But the experiments which are being done now by our playwrights, they are inspired by creative work. I would refer to play by Lankesh, "*Parten*", very powerful play, full of tension, dealing with a contemporary theme. The same play we did in *Bayalata* the traditional form with all

the conventions and songs and my friend Karanth is here who directed. I had a long discussion with him. The same play lost in time and tension in one dimension, but it gained in another dimension. Now Girish Karnad is using this half curtain in his play . . . *Hayavadan!* He gives it contemporary meaning, enlarges the area of dramatic use. It gives a different meaning and it was inspired by creative work.

B. V. Karanth: When *Parten* was taken up for the first time for production, many people said it was an ultra-modern play, an absurd play and that Lankesh was considered a playwright of the absurd. But the first part was completely in rural form. It was a problem for me to integrate two extremes. I thought it would not be possible, perhaps this would be a misfit. But while going through it we had a new experience. *Sangya Barian* is a rural form having very popular songs. It has 12—13 tunes which are repeated everywhere. We saw one possibility in the three characters Kitti, Bitti and Kanti without any definite characteristics. One typifies the middle class, one the upper class and one the lower class. It would mean that these were 3 (*Shadvargs*) good characters who come to test Man. Man can either be a politician or a professor but who has a very bad life-long record. They come as dogs. We took them as images and we gave them mask-like make-up for the three dogs and they were holding scarves in their hands because scarves are used in Karnatak theatre. This helps to keep the realistic and non-realistic characters distinct from each other. And when in the end realistic Man discovers that he did not have any existence and that the whole of life was unreal, he also starts singing like those three unreal characters. Till then only those three were singing and no one else. His entries and exits were emphasised with specific movements. Although all the actors were city-bred and did not know singing or dancing. They could not maintain rhythmic movements which had to be simplified or they would become emotional during a dance. One actor, because of his being emotional, he fell down one day, perhaps he was dancing for the first time. For us this was an experience of total theatre. In reaction to this some people said that this was an experiment for experiment's sake. One experiments, explores or exploits. There could be these three things, and it depends upon one's conviction. Ours' was really an exploration and the reaction to a modern play like *Parten* was very good. But those who were critical said that the play had lost in 'tension' the climaxes did not build up. At each climax a song would come and the moment there was a song, people felt relaxed. This relaxation from tension was a new experience and this was our whole purpose. If there had been 'tension' in this new form also, our experiment would not have been a success. Everything was done to bring about that relaxation. And in the end when everybody joins in to hit Man they sing a song, there was a very popular song, which was being sung even in *Harishchandra Taramati* also and all plays end with that song. This song was used at the end. The modern playwright Sri Ranga (Adya Rangachari) who has never songs in his plays heal so felt that this was *Bayallata* form after seeing the play.

Habib Tanvir

The use of the Kuchipudi curtain in "*Mrichakatika*" was of course functional and my reading of the text of the play led me to believe that most probably the Sanskrit dramatists when they give instruction "enter seated" "enter with the shade of the curtain" "enter sleeping", these are instructions in most of the Sanskrit plays and I read a lot about these. How were these entries made? Most unconvincing. All of them include some very authentic guidelines. Suddenly one thought about the South Indian dance form, *Kuchipudi*, etc. in which big personages enter behind the curtain and they emerge from behind the curtain. So I thought this probably was the way the Sanskrit drama characters used to enter. I used it and people liked it. It was effective, dramatic. And we chose characters who should be so distinguished by the curtain entries. But this was functional.

The other day, yesterday, for instance, at the television discussion Girish said (Girish Karnad) something about his being selfish in regard to absorbing whatever form suits him. Now that is of the very essence of all creative work. One is led to believe that it is. You might not use the word selfish, though it is expressive enough. It is a very subjective process and you really take whatever suits you so that you can project it most effectively. In "*Mrichakatika*" it was folk approach throughout. It suited it. One cannot justify it any further. At that time pandits frowned upon it. But later on they looked back upon it saying that it should be revived. And it was an achievement. As I look back upon it I do not think I would like to do it in the same manner now. One would not like to repeat. All the same in the making of the artists all these things which he toys with and experiments with, they go into it. I might repeat it broadly in the same manner and yet there is bound to be something new. *Agra Bazar* I am persuaded to believe is also folk inspired. Yet the difference between the 1964 production and 1970 production is very obvious. Not only have I revised the text, but there are many, many, differences of how the songs are projected. Of how music is used today. At the same time I also feel that my experiences in the utilisation of folk forms does tell me whenever I have utilised actual folk players I have had far better success and learnt a lot than otherwise. Without the participation of folk players when you are trying to give a turn to an urbanized image, which an urban playwright is imagining, and he is thinking in terms of folk traditions and wanting to give it that slant if he used these folk players he has a better chance of getting away with it. He is able to transform that form which he wants to transform in the semblance of a folk form.

Now another thing which is important for me is the assertion that these folk forms must die inevitably and without lament. Save for one factor, that the death of these forms, the blows by bureaucratic attitudes of Government set-up, whether it is in regard to tribal welfare or in regard to rural theatre this is really unkind. We have all

seen for instance "*My Fair Lady*". It is in fact in English folk style. Mr. Shaw, his classical play *Pygmalion* has been rendered into the folk form. All the songs are folk songs. Now what I am trying to say is that whatever folk form exists in primitive economy it is very sentimental to say: 'let us keep poor because our folklore otherwise will die'. Our folklore must die because we cannot afford to remain poor. We must make progress. As we make progress and industries encroach upon our rural economy into these areas where these forms exist and flourish, these forms suddenly change and also die. They die the same as human bodies do and are reformed so the reformation is not being helped through any vision on the part of these who really decide things in authority. So what is happening right now. I went to Bastar and I saw a lot of campaigning for the Hindi language. With the result that the tribals are looking down upon *Maria* and *Muria*, their own tribal dialects, and they think that they are really giving the impression of being far more educated if they would speak Hindi. They were speaking very bad Hindi and also very bad *Ma-ia* and *Muria*. Yet at the same time some progress has been made. They are making their baskets and their brooms and these are being exported in a more compact manner.. So there is more money today. At the same time their culture is suffering.

So what is really required? The absorption of these folk forms can take place according to the need of individual urban people with particular inclination and aptitude who go out, seek out these things sometimes consciously. Inevitably these mergings should be allowed to take place in the manner so that your urban culture emerges transformed having absorbed and assimilated all these forms. And then it may not remain the same. Yet its vitality should flow into the veins of the urban culture with the inevitable death of the folk form. Now this is the thesis on which most of us, even unconsciously, work.

It is only recently that I have come to believe that, probably I am doing it, when I got these very artistes here in 1958 to participate in *Mitti Ki Gadi* and again in *Agra Bazar* or I do a play today in the streets of Chandni Chowk. This is in fact a purely folk form, this political play I am doing. Now the various songs are sung. It is there. And inevitably. Because the purpose demands it, that it ought to be like this. The validity of this form is also relevant to our political and social endeavour through culture. But for some years one was agitated about it. I was personally fed up with all the beautiful aesthetics that go into the making of the so-called first-class production, in costume, in music, in composition, lighting, everything, because so much, so many of the people, the potential audiences, the people who are really alive, who can really laugh, all these people are barred out of these halls. That for one thing. For another this particular country with its social, economic and political needs requires middle-class people, the intelligentsia, to go out and be articulate and express the opinion about hygiene, about various things in terms of theatre and be able to go and approach the people and guide them. In recent years a strange phenomenon has struck

most of the middle-class intelligentsia and that is that they do talk intelligently for some time about what is going on all around them in the social and political fields without fighting shy of the fact that they should go and express themselves, persuade people and give suggestions and mould them. I today am firmly of the opinion that the traditional theatre forms ought to be more effectively utilised in this particular manner in political plays and social plays and go out to the people.

Girish: One point. The question of "*Parten*". I feel that Mr. Karanth is using the word tension in two senses. One as suspense and the other as tension itself. So I think what "*Parten*" does as a folk play was to get rid of the suspense part of it. I mean it was a suspenseful play earlier but not the real tension. The whole tragedy came because of the tension. But the structure of suspense was got out effectively. That was really nice.

Manorannjan Dass: You were talking about *Jatras* in Bengal. I am from Orissa. We do have *Jatras* also. But slightly different from your *Jatra*. Do you think that your *Jatra* is popular only because it has got a commitment? Or essentially because of the form? We do not have commitment. That way we are happy. But still we think our *Jatras* are very popular.

Utpal Dutt: Yes, you see all *Jatras*, Oriya or Bengali, both rely entirely on the masses for their support for their very existence so that the Bengali *Jatra* is at the moment declaring its commitment only because the people have moved somewhat towards militant politics. But it is also absolutely sure if tomorrow the people decide to be sick of this kind of politics, the Bengali *Jatra* will once again move away from it. I think, as we discussed at length the deciding factor is what the people want, because the *Jatra* has to exist entirely in the people, among the people, with the people and for the people.

J. C. Mathur: Well I have a difference with Mr. Dutt on the thesis he made for the *Jatra* this morning. I have seen most of the *Jatras* that Shri Dutt mentioned by implication or by direct reference and this particular *Jatra* which takes up the subject of Ho Chi Minh or Mao are simple bad *Jatras* and I do not think anything of the *Jatra* material at all. I saw "*Hitler*". It was a very bad production and it did not use any of the *Jatra* techniques or the *Jatra* media or the *Jatra* form at all. It tried to bring in a crude kind of sensationalism not the sensationalism that belongs integrally to the *Jatra*. It used entirely a different kind of sensationalism which is often crude. And the only instance where the *Jatra* uses a contemporary relevance or a contemporary meaning . . . formally and contemporarily, is the one it tries to use in a historical situation, a historical perspective which allowed for big kind of acting especially in a play by Shri Dutt a play like *Samudra Sasan*. It is about Samudra Gupta and his conflict with the scientists who speak for science and speak for reason, this is the conflict. It is a historical situation, historical perspective of that parti-

cular form and especially the use of actors, professional *Jatra* actors, trained in the *Jatra* mode which makes something very meaningful and exciting out of that. That whenever contemporary themes have been tackled and especially actors who do not belong to the *Jatra* tradition they have been going on, who just imitated the ordinary professional theatre mannerism they have been going on producing these plays. This Ho Chi Minh and Mao and revolutionary Vietnam and things like that. So the only meaningful use of the *Jatra* where the form was there, the use of music, the use of the intricate mixture of the comic and the transition from one level to another, it was evident only in that particular play *Samudra Sasan* which used a whole historical theme, and in fact the point which has not been mentioned earlier this morning was this that the *Jatra* had left the mythological framework and for the last few years it has concentrated on the historical framework, on history, medieval history, on fictitious or apocryphal history even, but mainly treating of history not mythology. We have some kind of a feeling that mythology is remoter than ancient history or medieval history. So I do not think that these plays merely treating the name of Mao or the name of Ho Chi Minh, I have never felt when I saw these plays that they were making any point, or they were really making any revolutionary point, any point of very contemporary political or social relevance. It was using certain names and the basic simple historical element or the basis of history was not being used, utilised in these cases at all. Neither were forms of the *Jatra*, the acting style or the forms of the *Jatra* being used. So I do not think the importance that Shri Dutt places on these plays should be given at all.

Awasthi: We are in a fortunate position in our country that bodies like the Akademi do not dictate the survival or the creative utilisation of any form. Habib said that he will absorb creatively certain elements and at the same time these forms would die, and we should not lament, but it seems to me it is going to be an inter-action and in the very process of your absorption, creatively as playwright, as director, you are also going to revitalise these forms. This is what has happened during the last 5-10 years. The moment you apply a certain convention, a technique from traditional theatre and give it a contemporary dimension, at the same moment you also give life to this traditional form. Therefore the very process of absorption or creative utilisation also is the process of their revitalisation. Not a question of Akademi or its grants and finances.

Dubey: Listening to what is happening to *Jatra* has made me realise that when a form is so alive that Marxists and Capitalists may join hands in utilising it, and even the 'sweet young things' then what more relevance could one want? So at this level where there is a form that has a mass base and it is exploited—by the Capitalist to earn money, by the Marxist for his own propaganda and by the sweet young things for their own satisfactions—this is at 3 levels. There could be another level, of somebody who wants to capture the essen-

tial purity of the *Jatra* form and communicate it—where you just want to communicate the (aesthetic) pleasure of the form itself. Now Bharatnatyam does not make any sense to me, but when I see a very fine dancer certainly I just enjoy it. This is also a valid level. *Jatra*, surprisingly seems to be able to provide all these 4 forms of relevance. And then there are other forms that may die out, but Dina and Shanta working in *Bhavai* or Girish in *Yakshagana*, their work may, as Dr. Awasthi hopes revive the forms, or they may not.

Shanta: I refuse to believe they are dying. They are bound to change in the sense that anything that is living, growing changes.

Dina: But a death is taking place, and it is a very serious death i.e. the death of the artist. The performers are dying out. And dying without delivery—That is where the Akademi can help. It is essential for us to meet and think aloud and it is a complex problem—Working in isolation one does not know what one wants to do. We have to do something about stepping into the tradition. We have been trained in Western theatre, we know our own only through books—now we are slowly getting to know it and we must get to know it, regionally—And perhaps meet regionally to thrash out these problems. It is not a new thing.

A member from Andhra Pradesh: In the past also, in Andhra Pradesh and other areas they have been used by political parties. You used the word 'tycoon' only for those who earn money—but I use it also for those who use it for their political purposes. But as Mr. Karnad used it, or as Habib Tanvir uses it, that can bring some relevance to these forms. We should not use these forms for our own change in the sense that anything that is living, growing, changes.

P. L. Deshpande: If we ponder over what happened in the 6th Century we may be able to think better. Buddha pointed to the flame of the burning candle and asked his disciple; 'Does the flame exist?' The disciple was not able to answer. Buddha said 'The flame seems to be constant, but the material that was there a second before is burnt out and gone. What you are seeing is constant death and constant regeneration!' When we think of the problem of traditional theatre and modern theatre in the manner of the flame, Buddha thought about, I think their views are not so irreconcilable as they themselves think.

Sheila Bhatia: The approach is, whatever exists today, how is it to be utilised. Because as it is utilised today, today it is modern, tomorrow that will become the tradition and this is how it is going to enrich the folk forms. We have talked about *Jatra*, I should like to talk about utilisation of folk songs, in creating modern opera. It was before Partition, that the folk songs with their vitality, honesty, lilt we thought were capable of expressing the aspirations of the people. Those

songs were utilised in various situations which happened to be immediate. For example a song like "*Cheenga in Chharinga*"—it was a song sung by the sweeper women—and we took the idea from this that when the rice is formed, the grain is on one side and the husk is on the other—so we took this idea that the truth is on one side and the false is on the other side—and the tune was utilised in lampooning certain social aspects of society for example "marriages are made in heaven"; or how in villages the peasant does not really like the woman to be educated. Then these songs were strung together and the items became bigger. This led to some operas which we have done. First only Punjabi tunes were taken but then we utilised tunes from other Provinces also—I am giving this example to say, that whatever exists, take them. As conscious artists we know that these things must be recreated, revitalised so that they suit the modern age of society. Whatever you and I have today the villages will have tomorrow and whatever forms they have they are bound to change. When folk singers come to town they take back certain other things that you and I call "hybrid" but this process you just cannot prevent. As long as our villages exist. We in the city should try to use these forms in new terms. So that these new trends today will become the traditions of tomorrow. If you want to use it for some political purpose I see no harm, but the aesthetic form must be maintained.

Romesh Chander: Apart from 3 or 4 producers or writers who have tried to take theatre to the people as such, for the rest, theatre to my mind exists for sophisticated audiences and they must understand the sophisticated ideas that they are trying to project. The relevance of this Seminar to my mind would be if these writers could say how traditional theatre is helping them to project their sophisticated views, their sophisticated techniques to an urban audience which will understand them better. Second—folk theatre in the villages always has been utilised for social comment—but social comment of a very mild type. I think it was a very conscious effort to keep a mild criticism in order to preserve the then existing status quo. I do not think a conscious effort was ever made to change the existing order through folk theatre. I think the time has now come, at least in India that we cannot wait any longer, when we must use the theatre to change the existing order. I am interested in the *Tamasha* or *Bhavai* being utilised for a particular purpose—and that purpose, to my mind is to change the status quo. In fact we must go one step forward and say how we can change it.

Badal Sarkar: Actually I am not going to clarify any issue at all. I was very glad when Mr. Romesh Chander made the first point. I am interested in the first point. Because this is the question in today's discussion when the problem of a man like me has been posed. Because I work for the urban audience, not because I want to do it or because I think that is the thing to be done but because I have no choice. I do not know the rural audience and however much I wish to serve them I just cannot. But I still want to work in the theatre. I do not know anything about traditional theatre, I have seen practically no *Jatra* at all from

beginning to end. But still I think that probably there are certain things in the form which I have heard from other people about the form, which can be used in the urban theatre, made by an urban man like me for the urban audience. It can be used to say the type of things I want to say. So I would very much like it if the first point is taken up.

But the second appoint appears to be much more important—the social commitment.

Dubey: I just want to know what is this conscientious role which the theatre man wants to play?

Romesh Chander: What is the relevance of the traditional theatre to people like you who are working only for the sophisticated theatre?

Dubey: For me it has no relevance. A play gets written and I find that this is the sort of the play I would like to do. '*Andha Yug*' which I did in 1962, at that time I was hardly in the theatre, just three years old and I did not know anything about Chhatisgarh literature or any sort of folk theatre and yet that play has lot of folk elements in it and the play appealed to me and I wanted to do it. But this is the urban man's approach to a play because he finds the play meaningful. Now may be a man who knew the folk theatre would have the choral singing in a different way. I just had it recited on the microphone. That is my tradition. I drew on my experience which is an urban experience and from the literature and from things I see around me. When last year I went and saw *Yakshagana* well I see something that hits me, I get excited. I tell Girish the '*Bhagavatha*' can be very useful in a play. I go and see a *Tamasha* and I find it excellent theatre—Now this is the urban man's attitude. Now the only thing which I, as an urban man can say is that, the only conscientious role which the theatre can fill is first of all not to bring electioneering issues in the theatre. I do not mind a committed theatre, generally committed, but for a conscientious theatre practitioner issues of elections should not be performed in the theatre.

Romesh: Why?

Dubey: Let me continue. The second thing is the only thing which for me theatre or any art form can do is to give insight to increase your awareness. How you utilise that awareness whether in the form of say Sartre or Camus again is a very personal decision. The third thing which the theatre can do and which the modern theatre practitioner has tried to do, is to give just sheer aesthetic enjoyment. For instance, if I took a farce, just because it is a farce I would not dismiss it. The point is if I can in the form of a given play or a sort of *Yakshagana* which Dr. Awasthi has not liked, Mr. Karanth's *Yakshagana*, which he produced—now that for me is tremendous aesthetic pleasure and yet I knew this form can only serve the urban interest. The *Yakshagana* from that point has deteriorated like all other folk forms ultimately will do. The fourth function of the urban audience is to create the folk theatre of the future. Today all the film songs that I took in my plays they are

a part of my consciousness and they have already become popular tunes in all the villages. I am taking examples of films where I can prove that a song which came from a folk song became a film song lost its folk root and again became a folk song. Now this is the process which comes about and I think this is what the urban audience is trying to do. "*Adhe Adhure*" today which is hailed as the great modern play, three years hence this play is going to become a small-town play, and after that it will be performed in every small town. By that time we will have gone to another situation. These are the four functions of the modern theatre, urban theatre and this is the only conscientious role which I think the modern theatre practitioner can play.

Girish: I have only one point to make and that is that when one talks about the rural audience and the urban audience I think we exaggerate the difference. I think we take too much for granted that the urban audience is very sophisticated. Ultimately I think in India the values which the urban middle class audience follow are really very little different from the values which are followed in the villages. I think those of us who have been exposed, those of us who have read about it, do talk about it. But all too often I find that in a Maharashtra locality in Bombay say where really the middle-class live or in Bangalore, really most of these have contacts with the villages, their families are in villages. They follow the same ideas about morality, about living, about aspirations, everything which does connect the two. And secondly, where the folk theatre comes in, the question of relevance, is that in the folk theatre many of the issues do deal with these problems which are still alive. If I may take my own example, when I wrote "*Yayeti*", everyone said it was a mythological play when it was being done in Bombay and they said most people won't follow the story of it, give the gist of the story, add a prologue. As it transpired most of the Marathi audience did not want the story. They knew the story and responded to the central situation and issue which was at stake. I consider myself as much urban as anyone else and I think we are discussing these two and the relevance of these we should bear in mind that the urban audience is not as alienated as one usually makes it out to be.

Balwant Gargi: The same problem of the division of urban and rural; I can speak about the Punjab, it does not exist there. Because Punjabi's in their heart and in manners are totally rural. Even when you see people in "Gaylord" lunching, or people in Chelmsford Club they are excited by *Bhangra* more than anything else. In rural areas of Punjab a farmer goes on his tractor with a transistor and I met farmers who said 'well we use Helicopter, spray insecticide.' So in Punjab this division—cultural division—of the urban and the rural, is totally absent. I am sophisticated-urban first, but very much rural at heart. That was one point I wanted to make. That this distinction in our society is a bit artificial. Secondly, many people were sharing their own experiences: well I do plays. I happened to do one on Guru Nanak which I did with great diffidence because the subject was difficult. But this Sikh community and the Gurunanak Committee they talked with me. I said: "all

right I will do a play on Guru Nanak'. I started writing it and then I got a note, 'please check up that you don't use Guru Nanak's image or person in the play!' It is like a play say—'Hamlet' without the Prince of Denmark. So I made a note of that point and I went ahead and about 4 days before the production started I got a legal notice and the Home Secretary telephoned me—'we hear you are showing Guru Nanak's mother and wife on the stage and there will be a mob attacking you. You don't do it.' So I started thinking and it became a question of total flop because 2 people can destroy a production as you know. So I thought of many folk forms which I had seen and I used for Mata Tripta, Guru Nanak's mother, a double, the Pradharni, an actress, who comes and reports that Mata Tripta, says; and she becomes Mata Tripta in the process as they do in ritualistic drama. The actor for example in *Terukoothu* announces the entry of the King and then becomes the King—and in the process the third person becomes the first person. I am only retelling of some of the help I had from my own experiences of folk theatre. This play was an effort to battle with a situation where the Community bans Guru Nanak and other characters and where all other difficulties arose and here folk theatrical elements did help in carrying this play in the rural areas of the Punjab.

Badal Sarkar: I want to stick to the original point. I am interested in the question of urban theatre. I do not know the Punjab, but in Bengal there is a lot of difference between urban audiences, urban theatre and theatre in rural forms. Now I have to work for urban audiences and all I know is the problem of these people—it's a very narrow theatre. I admit, and I have no intention of carrying this theatre to the rural areas at all, because it is not about the problems of rural people, so I have no right at all to carry it to them. So I want to take it from my point—not how folk art lives, or should be preserved or recreated, I am interested in propagating my type of problems. I use theatre as I learnt it and probably everybody would agree that that concept of theatre came from the West. We did not really take it from the *Jatra* form. But now with the complexity of the middle-class increasing we are searching for new forms because we are finding the 'naturalistic form' and the 'proscenium arch' inadequate to voice our problems. So we want to break this tradition inherited from the West. So while I do not want to do anything for the rural theatre I still want to borrow from the folk form to serve my own purpose. For example, there are many theatre groups in Calcutta, I lead a very humble group—there are difficulties—as most, we are in financial straits and I find that the urban theatre is becoming more and more expensive. So what I want to do is to make urban theatre as cheap as possible. To make it cheap I must do away with sets, or many lights. So I need new techniques. Still I want it to be urban theatre for urban folk. In traditional *Jatra* for example the thing that appeals to me is that it does not use any set—it did not use any furniture—In fact I think the dramatic personae were not allowed to sit. They did use costumes and certain props. In an arena type of production, that is doing away with the stage, makes it still cheaper. So from that point of view I think this traditional form is important to me.

I do not want to write a play in the *Jatra* form. I want to write for urban theatre but I want to take these traditional forms and use it there. How can I do that?

Tendulkar: I would like to indulge in some folk form that would suit my needs—I want to find my way out.

Rakesh: When we chose this subject of the contemporary relevance of Traditional theatre, there are 2 aspects of it—we are discussing only one. That is, how far the modern themes, modern influences are to be traced to traditional theatre—what influence these things are having on the traditional forms? But the other thing is more relevant for us, that is how far these forms are going to influence our writing or our concept of theatre. Mr. Sarkar has very clearly said that as a man who knows his audience, who knows his middle-class and does not have any pretension to any roots in the rural theatre, he has his problem as a theatre man and as he says he would like to expose himself to more such forms so that he could mould a cheaper theatre which he could take to larger city audiences. But I don't understand why this sort of deliberate, conscious and artificial exposure is necessary, because we are being exposed to whatever our tradition is in our daily life—if I exist in any sphere of Indian society I am exposed right from birth to what is my tradition. Everything I have been exposed to in my daily life, I have absorbed in me, that tradition lives in me and inadvertently, whether I want it or not that tradition gets expressed in my work. Therefore, on the one hand, I believe in greater exposure, certainly it may help us bring about better results but that sort of decision that 'I am going to use such-and-such form for my next play' or 'I am going to experiment with folk tradition because folk tradition should be used'—this sort of thing I totally reject. That would not lead us anywhere. If it is unconscious, subconscious and automatic, then certainly it is most welcome, but if it is an effort because it is the fashion today—this sort of approach I would totally reject.

Girish: My only difference with Mr. Rakesh would be that I don't believe that automatically one gets to know their importance. In any other art—say that of the musician—however good a voice he may have, one would not consider that he knows all styles of classical music—he may have listened to many, but he would require to study. Now I don't know why, for a playwright one should not assume the same sort of responsibility—that he should try to understand (study) these forms. One may not know what form one's next play needs. But as a playwright one should try to increase his field, and to that extent a playwright has some responsibility to get to know these forms.

Mathur: Exposure is one thing, choice is another. Exposure has nothing compulsive about it, but it is necessary to arrange exposure in order to give to the playwright a choice. Unfortunately in India that choice was missing until recently attempts were made to enable the writer to see it. It is lucky that a writer like Mohan Rakesh was able to see some of these traditions, but how many of the younger generation? Is it not a fact that much of our generation (of the late 30's)

were influenced much more by what we read of Western plays than by what we saw? Therefore I see some advantage to the playwright of today and tomorrow who will be able to see some of the rich heritage of our traditional theatre. Secondly India is one of the few countries where these forms are living. Therefore opportunity to be exposed to them is not a bad thing altogether but certainly any compulsion upon a writer would be harmful to any creative writing.

Karnad: I think the best one can do is to try and make things specific if one could get one's teeth into some concrete problem—such as the discussion on Mr. Utpal Dutt's work—we could relate the problem to a specific end. If others present here could talk of how folk theatre has affected them and their work in it—it might give a focal point to the discussion—This is a question I would like to ask Mr. Tendulkar, because he has written a play based on the Marathi *Tamasha*.

Tendulkar: I could narrate the whole experience. I went to see a *Tamasha*. I had seen *Tamasha* before that many times, but I don't know why, that was a memorable experience; after returning home—the whole mode of thinking changed. I started talking to myself as though I were a character in *Tamasha*—in that rustic language and I could see the form coming to me. The changed mode of thinking, I felt it right from the next day. Even my style of conversation changed. I was so attracted by the form that I started speaking in the vocabulary of a *Tamasha*, to my friends; to my family. I wanted to write a *Tamasha*. The theme came to me naturally—it was about my people—the middle, the white-collar-class—and the absurd situation in which that class exists just now. I felt the theme would suit the form, because the absurdity of the situation would be rather enlarged and would be more effective. So I used the form keeping that perspective and that angle. It influenced me for many days. Of course I was not satisfied with whatever I did with the form. But the sense of liberation I got after seeing the *Tamasha* that night and after writing one I shall never forget and I feel I'd like to experiment again. The result (production) did not satisfy me.

Dubey: What were the special elements that you took from the *Tamasha*?

Tendulkar: It gave me the feel of liberation—because I was used to the vagaries of my form of writing and consciously I was fed-up with this form. And here was the technical freedom which I required at that stage. And I think that was the major thing that attracted me. Of course, the rustic quality of the form also—I mean the texture of the language, it is a special language which I was not used to.

Karnad: There is one point of the influence of the folk theatre on the playwright. And that is in the folk form the writer is very much in the background. The script—poems, songs—are merely the point of departure. During performance the actor—and also the dancer—they improvise. The whole development is left to the actor and dancer. It seems to me, although Mr. Utpal Dutt was caustic about references to

Grotowsky, from one performance I saw I felt that the theatre is going to take over and the importance that the playwright had during the last 150 years is getting withdrawn. I think Mr. Sarkar will agree, he is also working in the theatre, choreographing the whole thing. In effect, the playwright is working towards his own annihilation. The more playwrights get attracted to the folk forms, this situation will get stronger automatically.

Alkazi: I think the situation of the playwright handing over to the actors can only happen in a medium where the actors have been living as part of a tradition for generations. This is not something that amateurs can pick up, nor even a professional trained in a school of drama. I think that the theatrical quality, the capacity to keep in constant touch with the audience, the capacity to draw inspiration from that audience at all stages so that you are constantly fed with theatrical and dramatic ideas which then become part of the material that you use, as part of your improvisation, that is not something that is merely inspired on the spur of the moment, but which is the result of a fantastic amount of experience which goes back to generations. Also this is possible where the oral tradition is very strong. And when literary tradition comes in, interferes with, a strong oral tradition then I think it tends to ruin the oral tradition. The oral tradition is a very important part of one's total education, and this is a tradition that is shared by a community as a whole. When on the one hand, the community begins to lose its integrity then it disintegrates. The common language, which is part of the popular myth, also disintegrates. This is where the disintegration of the folk form takes place because it is not only the disintegration of a society but also that of the spokesmen of that society.

There are 3 parties in any folk form that are concerned: one is the playwright who, as Mr. Tendulkar quite rightly suggested, feels suddenly liberated by coming across a form which gives him a freedom which he had not thought himself capable of utilising. This is really the freedom of all the dramatic resources. What tends to happen in the 'prose' theatre is that you are merely utilising one of the least significant elements in the theatre—you develop it in terms of ideas—develop it in the Ibsenite form—ultimately you are bound to reduce it to the realm of naturalism, to the element of mere prose. Leaving aside all the other elements of the theatre which are spectacle, music, dance and which effect you at a very important subconscious level.

The other factor that comes in is your audience. We need to find out why a play like '*Jasma Odan*'—which is a *Bhavai*—suddenly sets up reverberations all over the country—no matter where you perform. The audience too, feels suddenly liberated.

The third element is the element of the director. I feel completely bored with the types of scripts that are sent to me now and which I have got to produce, because it does not interest me now to produce plays in the Ibsenite manner. I feel that here are dimensions that are suddenly given to one in a form which already exists. I think Mr.

Mathur's point was very valid and needs to be taken very seriously, here is the only country in the world where these folk theatre forms exist—they are part of the living tradition. It is part of our own fate to see that they continue to exist, to see that they are utilised. On the other hand the playwright should have complete liberty to use a large number of conventions and forms—from as many forms as possible. In this way, on the one hand by preserving the purity of the tradition, on the other hand, by experimenting, and side by side, those who are interested in the prose theatre, continue with the prose theatre—I think we will get the dialectics which are necessary for the vitality of the theatrical tradition.

Awasthi: I am glad Mr. Alkazi has raised these points. Some of us when talking of Traditional Theatre sound like prophets, or saviours, or benefactors. We should realise that Traditional Theatre is there in its own right for the past two thousand years. And will continue to survive. Therefore even the greatest playwright or director cannot pass a verdict—as a prophet—the doom of the Traditional Theatre. The verdict will be given by the people who have sustained it through the centuries. Apart from this—is our own relationship as theatre-workers to this theatre in our own contemporary work. There again I think we have to approach it in a spirit of humility, with a desire to learn. What Uday Shankar did in the field of dance or Shanti Bardhan—created a great contemporary, creative dance, utilising all the traditional dance heritage. What Vijay Raghav Rao is doing in the field of music. Husain is now painting a whole series of Ramayana characters and episodes and giving it a contemporary sensitivity—the characters have never involved us in the manner that they are doing now through his painting. And finally, as Mr. Alkazi rightly said, it is not a question of limiting, or rejecting or discarding the prose theatre—but here is a great opportunity, a vast store house living side-by-side inevitably as part of our destiny. Mohan Rakesh used Prologue in this manner in "*Adhe Adhure*" only because he is part of this tradition. Badal Sarkar without knowing anything about *Jatra* writes a play "*Evam Indrajeet*" which draws upon improvisation, because he is part of this tradition. Therefore we cannot really escape it. As Mr. Alkazi suggested—here is scope for playwrights, for directors, because it is altogether a different aesthetics from the (urban) theatre of the last 150 years. With prose theatre—we take a script and it is "re-production". With a traditional form—whether it is *Yakshagana*, *Kathakali*, *Noh* or *Kabuki*, it is a "re-creation". They are rich in conventions and techniques which a sensitive playwright and director could use to enrich his work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Seminar considered the relevance of the traditional theatre in the modern context in three aspects. First, the continuation in the future, of the tradition of this form of theatre by those who have hitherto kept

it alive and steps necessary for making such continuity possible. Secondly, the need for establishing a communication, understanding, rapport and mutual appreciation between traditional stage artists and the moderns. Thirdly, recognition that modern dramatic expression whether in writing or acting or production cannot escape the environment of the traditional theatre and a consideration of the ways in which this impact may manifest itself. Fourthly, the importance of the documentation of the material of the traditional forms of drama.

Of these four aspects of the theme, the Round Table on the last day particularly endeavoured to put in more specific terms the steps that seem necessary for enabling the various forms of traditional theatre in India to survive and prosper in their own environments and areas. It was felt that barring a handful of forms such as *Jatra*, the *Raas Leela* and *Tamasha*, the others are languishing for want of patronage and facilities. Various participants at the Round Table, therefore, made several suggestions of which the following appeared to receive the consensus:

(a) It was suggested that since the traditional forms are essentially local or regional in character, an attempt should be made to introduce the regional form of traditional theatre as a group activity in the schools in that area as a part of and enrichment of general education. It need not be a compulsory but should be an extracurriculum activity. It is natural that the children from the traditional families may feel more involved. But the point is that if it is introduced in the schools then the children from the traditional families would feel no sense of inferiority in keeping up this tradition;

(b) it is necessary to help the actors and performers of these forms. This has been attempted in a fragmentary manner by certain groups in the cities who have acted as sponsors or impressarios for them. It will, therefore, be desirable to encourage any urban group or organisation that takes concrete steps for helping actors, performers, individually or as a group, from the villages and small towns in these forms;

(c) it was necessary to have a small fleet of mobile vans, self-contained and fully equipped and simple to use, to make them available to groups on reasonable hire rates so that they could move about in their areas and even beyond;

(d) regional and local festivals should be organised in areas where such forms are particularly popular. At these festivals a sizeable number of awards should be instituted out of the grants given for the purpose by the Akademi. Festivals like that at Udipi have already given an indication of what can be done. State Akademis should be persuaded to help annual festivals of traditional forms of theatre;

(e) short training courses for the more professional among the performers of the traditional theatre would also be necessary. This can be done at Camps or Shivirs and would enable the more enterprising and expert among the performers to give time and energy for this kind of training;

(f) a number of old troupes are languishing for want of leadership by people with sympathy but modern expertise. It is necessary to assist such enterprises because in this way the choreography and presentation could improve. It is obvious that only such persons among modern artists and producers should be assisted to advise and to lead troupes, as can completely identify themselves with the spirit of the particular dramatic form. They should work with a troupe not so much to teach as to become part of it and slowly and with consideration enable the traditional players to present performances in the modern environment;

(g) it would be desirable if the National School of Drama were to present, in an improved and sympathetically edited form, portions or full plays of these traditional plays. This would really necessitate the establishment of a special performing-cum-training unit for traditional drama at the National School. Care to avoid forced modernisation of these forms would have to be taken;

(h) in Japan there are a number of *Noh* and *Kabuki* troupes that are either maintained by the State or subsidised by it. Subsidy in direct or indirect form is also provided by big business houses. In India, traditional theatrical forms would appear to be a worthy object of assistance by Tourism development organisations and agencies as well as by commercial bodies such as hotels. In this respect, Japan's example is worth considering. The Sangeet Natak Akademi could well take up this matter with the Ministry of Tourism;

(i) in cooperation with Unesco, the organisation of a festival of theatrical forms of the traditional type for this region would appear to be an urgent undertaking with a view to getting a comparative idea of the forms prevalent in neighbouring countries.

The *second category* of recommendations referred to the necessity of the rapport between traditional and modern artists. Several speakers expressed the view that even in the Seminar there was hardly any opportunity for the modern participants to get to know some of those traditional artists who had been good enough to give performances. It was explained that it was not the purpose of the Round Table to provide such an opportunity; yet it was readily recognised that opportunities for such rapport would be very desirable and have indeed been provided at the instance of the Akademi at some of the regional festivals. Such communication between traditional and modern artists is not free from difficulties particularly because of the barrier of language. However, it should be possible to have as interpreters some of the modern artists and specialists in the region. It is also obvious that such rapport cannot be established by inviting individual traditional artists to gatherings of modern ones because traditional artists might feel ill at ease. The reverse process might yield better results. At any rate, the Round Table thought that the Akademi would do well to go into details of bringing about such a situation.

The *third category* of conclusions related to the question of the exposure of modern drama to the traditional Indian theatrical forms and

the possible formative influence therefrom. On this point there was a lively discussion and naturally any attempts at forcing the pace of such influence were opposed. It was felt that in any case this is a matter which should be left to the genius of the individual actors, playwrights, producers, technicians etc. While it is not possible to lay down any standard pattern of the impact of traditional theatre on the modern, it might be useful to provide opportunity to such modern playwrights and performers as are interested in identifying with those elements in the traditional forms of theatres as can lend themselves to modern presentation or adaptations. In such a process the Akademi can be of help by screening documentary films, as the artists, playwrights and producers are not themselves able to go to the locale to see these performances. At the same time, the Akademi can organise visits to places and festivals where such performances are given. A beginning in this direction on an individual basis has already been made by the Akademi.